

ADVENTURE EDUCATION: IMPACT ON
TEAM BUILDING, TRUST, AND COOPERATION

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Physical education class has started. The students are moving and competing in the day's planned activity. Students are learning the specifics of the activity/sport and are improving their fitness levels. Sounds like everything is going fine, right? Well, not exactly! Some students are reluctant to participate out of fear that they are not good enough or will fail. Others may not be capable of performing at the same level as their peers, may have a poor self-esteem, or may learn better through affective learning as compared to intellectual learning. There is an abundance of factors that play into a class running smoothly and the students gaining from the class experience. These are some of the challenges faced by physical education teachers. Throughout my 18 years of teaching physical education and coaching, I have encountered all of these challenges and more, as well as the rewards that accompany teaching. Entering this school year, I reflected on past teaching experiences and my personal beliefs and philosophies for the classroom, asking myself how I might improve. I was hoping to find activities that were less competitive, more cooperative, and more fitting to the needs of all my students, thus decreasing the daily challenges each of them faces, yet giving them something that would benefit them throughout their life, in addition to being fit. Solas (1992) suggests that teachers and students have particular views of the teaching and learning process, which inform and shape what transpires when they are engaged in the process. Exploring how educational theories relate to the teacher and students' behaviors within a typical classroom helps us to understand our teaching, and make it more context-specific and realistic.

As I searched for an approach that would both complement my teaching and intrigue my students, a colleague invited me to go on a field trip to the university ropes course. It was at this point that I was introduced to adventure education. After watching and participating in the ropes course, I decided to research the topic and see if this type of programming was what I was looking for to excite, to engage, and to have an impact on my students. Perhaps programming in this area would strengthen their skills in team building, trust, and cooperation. This paper will describe adventure education and the students'/teacher's view on how they feel it affects team building, trust, and cooperation in the physical education classroom.

Definition of Adventure Education

Adventure education is a unique educational approach to teaching students to solve problems and take responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions. It draws on such platonic ideals as taking risks to improve the human condition (Wurdinger, 1994). Karl Rohnke suggests that the program has become an exciting and accepted philosophy of the education of the total person. It promotes the education of "the total student by developing each child mentally, physically, emotionally and socially to produce an effective citizen for our society" (Project Adventure, 1991). Students learn to solve problems by working together in a group creatively and effectively (Webster, 1989). Adventure education involves traditional indoor/outdoor activities, as well as pursuits that apply stress or challenge to the participants. Examples of some activities are group games, climbing wall, mountain biking, ropes course, and orienteering (Rohnke, 1989). Recently, several researchers have promoted adventure education as a possible curricular

innovation in education (Hammersley, 1992; Henton, 1996; Horwood, 1995; Miles and Priest, 1990; Project Adventure, 1991; Robinson, 1992; Warren, Sakofs, & Hunt, 1995).

History/Philosophy

Although researchers view this as an innovative approach, adventure education has been utilized since the era of WWI when Kurt Hahn organized Outward Bound (Miles & Priest, 1990). Since that time other programs have been developed that have complemented the field. For example, the program “Project Adventure,” developed by Jerry Pieh, has become one of the leading programs in adventure education (Webster, 1989).

The idea of using adventure challenges as a means to human growth and development has become an accepted methodology in education. The philosophy behind adventure education and its components, such as the ropes course, contends that an environment conducive to the “learning experience” must incorporate both practice and theory (Meyer, 1973). The purpose of the activities has nothing to do with stunts or being a “daredevil.” For example, the ropes course can be used as a tool that puts its participants into challenging and stressful situations. Both individual and group skills are addressed. Many situations call for team problem solving, good communication, trust in one another, and working together to fulfill the task created. The goal in adventure education is not competition; rather, it is cooperation where the simple act of trying makes each person a winner.

Purpose

The focus of this study was to describe and interpret the teacher's and students' perceptions of their traditional physical education programming, as compared with adventure education type activities. Comparisons were also made regarding the benefits gained from each type of programming. The data from this paper came from sophomores, juniors, and seniors in high school. The students were in a traditional physical education class or had participated in them in the past. These same students were also participants in a ropes course activity they attended through a field trip to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Procedures

In this study the triangulation principle is used. The triangulation principle uses a variety of methods to collect data or information rather than relying solely on one (Mills, 2000). The methods used for the purpose of this study were surveys, structured interviews, informal interviews, and participant observations. The formal surveys provide quantitative data, while the informal interviews and observations provide qualitative data.

Method

The initial step in the study involved a class of 51 seniors who were taking a field trip to the University ropes course. These students were given a survey prior to their experiencing the ropes course, as well as a survey upon their completion of the ropes course. The pre-survey asked the students to rank on a scale from 1-5 (five being excellent), their perception of the following skills and how they felt a traditional physical

education class would promote the following areas: team building, communication, trust, problem solving, cooperation, and competition. The post-survey asked students the same questions, using the same scale, relating their experiences from their involvement on the ropes course. After both pre- and post-surveys were completed by all students, a comparison was then conducted to analyze the students' perceptions of both types of activities they participated in and which activities they felt promoted the above mentioned areas targeted on the survey.

The second part of the study was a comparison between traditional physical education warm-ups and adventure education warm-ups. Again, pre- and post-surveys, with a ranking scale of 1-5 (five being excellent) were used. The survey was administered to 52 juniors in two physical education classes. Students were asked if traditional physical education warm-ups, such as walking and jogging, got them ready for the activities for the class; were these warm-ups fun and exciting; did they promote cooperation; and did they help them get to know their classmates? Students then participated in a unit using adventure education warm-ups throughout the unit. Students were then given the same survey as a post-survey.

The third part of the study was conducted using two sophomore classes (62 students), who took part in a games unit in physical education that featured adventure education activities. The students were interviewed formally and informally upon completion of the games unit. The formal interviews gathered consistent data from the students by asking them the same questions, documenting their responses. Students were asked if adventure games provided them with a cardiovascular workout, promoted

teamwork, promoted cooperation, promoted problem-solving skills, and if they had fun. The informal interviews were conversations with the students to get their opinions about adventure education, with the researcher documenting responses at the end of each interview.

The final method used was observation. Students were observed in traditional physical education games and warm-up activities, as well as in adventure games, adventure warm-up activities, and at the university ropes course field trip. My observations were reflected in writing.

Results of the Students' Perceptions of Adventure Education

The results of the initial survey comparing traditional physical education activities to the ropes course activities showed that students favored the ropes course activities in terms of promoting communication, teamwork, trust, cooperation, and problem solving. However, the students felt that physical education activities were geared more toward competition than the ropes course. In Table 1 the data is broken down, showing the average of the responses for each question.

Table 1. Average of Responses for Traditional Physical Education Activities and Ropes Course Activities (rating scale 1-5, with 5 being excellent)

Question	Physical Education	Ropes Course
Promotes Communication	2.88	4.50
Promotes Teamwork	2.94	4.52
Promotes Trust	2.37	4.41
Promotes Cooperation	2.86	4.45
Promotes Problem Solving Skills	2.07	4.52
Geared Toward Competition	3.84	2.64

Table 2. Average of Responses for Traditional Warm-Up Activities and Adventure Warm-Up Activities (rating scale 1-5, with 5 being excellent)

Question	Traditional Physical Education Warm-up Activities	Adventure Warm-up Activities
Activities get you ready	2.51	3.28
Activities are fun and exciting	1.96	3.38
Activities help you to know your classmates	2.00	4.25
Activities promote cooperation	2.36	4.34

The results of the survey comparing traditional warm-ups to adventure warm-ups are shown in Table 2. The results indicate that students favor adventure warm-ups in terms of getting one ready for the day's activities, being fun, getting to know classmates, and promoting cooperation.

Formal Interview Results

The results of the formal interview of students who participated in the adventure games unit indicate that the students were provided with cardiovascular workouts, teamwork, cooperation, problem solving skills, and fun. The data below (Table 3) was interpreted by the number of yes/no responses tallied per question from a total of 62 students.

Table 3. Responses to Adventure Activities

Question: Did Adventure Activities Promote:	Yes Responses	No Responses
Cardiovascular Workout	41	21
Teamwork	54	8
Cooperation	58	4
Problem Solving	52	10
Fun	57	5

Informal Interview Results

The results of the informal interviews indicate that students were supportive of adventure education activities. Most students commented that they liked the cooperation taking place in these activities, as compared to the competitive feeling they had in their traditional physical education classes. Another comment made by the students was that they felt there was more teamwork and problem solving taking place in the cooperative games, as compared to the traditional physical education class. Many of the other areas touched upon in the informal interviews were strongly supported on the pre/post surveys, as well as the formal interviews that were conducted and previously reported.

Participant Observations Results

Observation of students in adventure activities provided qualitative results. Notes were taken during the observations and a reflection was written after the activity. My observation of traditional physical education classes revealed that there was a high level of competition involved. In many games there was a winner and a loser, and winning seemed to be a very high priority. Instances of poor sportsmanship, poor language, and aggressive behavior were all observed. There were also positive attributes gained from the units observed (basketball, soccer, flag football, softball, and floor hockey), such as improving themselves at the sport, as well as receiving a good cardiovascular workout. However, these activities did not appear to address the areas of trust, cooperation, and problem solving. Some students seemed reluctant to participate because of the level of intensity or skill required to compete.

Students at the ropes course took part in activities that emphasized cooperation, trust, and problem solving. The icebreakers and warm-up games appeared to make the students feel comfortable with each other. Problem solving activities such as the “spider web” were activities the students had to accomplish as a group. It was evident that teamwork and cooperation among the students was crucial for completion of the task. The students also took part in trust activities such as “trust circle” and “two person trust fall.” These proved to be important lessons for the students as they moved to the low ropes elements. In the low ropes elements, students had to work as a team, cooperate, solve problems, and trust one another. The students seemed to pull together as a unit to accomplish each challenge. During the high ropes elements, students were very supportive of one another. For example, one student on the “floating islands” (25 feet high) was terrified and said, “I can’t do this!” and started to cry. All the students on the ground began to shout words of encouragement and cheer her on. I believe that the words of encouragement are what gave her the courage to complete the course. She made it! Once she was on the ground, a smile appeared on her face, her self-confidence shone, and her success was all she could talk about.

My observations of adventure games and warm-ups in the physical education class found students using teamwork, trust, cooperation, communication, and problem solving skills. Students seemed to like the cooperative challenges within groups, instead of competing against one another. It was great to see everyone having fun, without the focus on winning or losing. Students were also very open during the discussion/reflection time during class. This was the use of a brief and debrief session,

which has often been referred to as “processing” (Nadler & Luckner, 1992). Through my observations, students’ growth has been documented in the areas of trust, teamwork, cooperation, communication, and problem solving while participating in adventure education activities. The students’ self-esteem appears to be good, and they seem to be having fun while participating in the adventure activities. The qualitative results support the findings of the quantitative data.

Summary of Surveys/Interviews

Both the quantitative and qualitative data show support for adventure education. The results of the surveys comparing a variety of areas in traditional physical education classes to adventure activities, games, and the ropes course activities indicated that the students favor the latter three when it comes to promoting communication, teamwork, trust, cooperation, and problem solving amongst their peers. They also indicated that these activities were more fun and allowed them to get to know their classmates on a more individual basis. The responses on the surveys supported adventure activities, games, and ropes course activities as a good means of getting a cardiovascular workout as well. The one area that was not supported by the students in the adventure activities, games, and ropes course was the area of competition. Overall, the students felt that the traditional education classes were geared toward competition.

Teacher’s Perceptions of Adventure Education as a Teaching Tool

Through my research and hands-on experiences with Adventure Education, I have found that this type of programming touches on so many crucial aspects of life: respect, trust, self-esteem, leadership, social skills, cooperation, communication, and many more.

These aspects of life can be difficult to teach in regular physical education programs that focus merely on learning each sport. Westheimer, Kahne, and Gerstein (1992) have suggested that teachers in schools should recognize the inherent qualities of adventure education, which utilizes the experiential learning process.

A great benefit from adventure education is that it enhances the wellness of the student's spirit, body, and mind. It looks at the whole student and helps him or her grow to fullest potential. This type of curriculum gives the participants a chance to push past their comfort zones to see how far they can go, as they experience new activities in a supportive environment of peers (Project Adventure, 1991). "Traditional approaches rely on abstraction and result in student passivity, experiential approaches encourage active participation in meaningful task oriented activities" (Westheimer, Kahne, & Gerstein, 1992, p. 45). A high priority to using this type of approach is that we as teachers can focus on the many positive assets (communication skills, critical thinking skills, team building, sense of empathy, problem solving skills, self confidence, trust, perseverance, and strategies to resolve conflicts) that we can instill in our students that will aid them in becoming great contributors to our society (Henton, 1996).

Another benefit I have found in adventure education with regard to physical education is that it places everyone on an equal playing level. In some physical education classes, students may not do a skill very well, so they choose not to participate, due to their fear of looking worse than the other students. This is where use of the "full value contract" comes into play. This is a written or verbal agreement that explains that every student is equal. It talks about the respect and emotional support that everyone in the

group needs to display. It also empowers students up front to choose to do things or not. One of the greatest benefits I see students receive while participating in adventure activities is that they have fun with each other and really bond together while they learn the important aspects of trust, leadership, and cooperation. I noticed this bonding and trust in my own experience when I joined the Senior Learning Community from North High School in a ropes course experience, as well as when I participated in the University ropes course. We all laughed together, and we helped each other accomplish the objectives as a team. The smiles and positive comments from the students were a good indication that the activities were developing appropriate attitudes toward their peers, the activities, and their self-confidence. Zuberbuhler (1995) feels that this self-confidence, trust, and fun that we all experienced was due to the fact that the key to this type of learning is that everyone within the group needed to master the task at hand, thus enhancing and creating self-confidence, acceptance, self-worth, and interdependence within each individual or group of individuals. These values touch upon the emotions of the participants, as well as teaching them to appreciate personal differences rather than physical abilities.

Limitations/Concerns with the Research

Throughout this article I have reflected on the strengths of the research findings as they relate to adventure activities, adventure games, and ropes course activities. I also feel that it is important to address the limitations that were encountered during this research project, so the reader understands that there were limitations observed and taken into consideration when reporting the results. A limitation that I see in the research was

with the sampling. The sample could have been broader, covering a wider age range and more students, to further validate the findings. An area of concern comes in the results section, when it is reported that adventure activities are ranked high by a majority of the students. These results represent the majority. As a teacher, I know that it is important to be sure that the needs of all students are being met, and I know that not all students are adventure-type learners. In these instances it will be important for the teacher to work with the student individually, helping him/her take the risks that are appropriate for his/her comfort level and ability. Another factor to consider is that all teachers may not “buy into” adventure education activities, which is ok. However, they should be aware that they may use some of the innovative strategies, such as personal goal setting, the brief and debrief, the concepts of risk, trust, cooperation, challenge, and problem solving. These strategies can be used regardless of the specific subject matter of the lesson (Henton, 1996). Another major limitation that could occur is the lack of funding or support to start an adventure program or ropes course at your school.

Effects

When considering implementing an adventure education program, schools should be aware of the benefits that have been identified in this study, as well as some of the considerations that might occur. Areas to consider are financial availability, scheduling, staffing needs, facilities, and transportation issues. These considerations are not insurmountable. Rarely are new educational programs introduced without encountering a few roadblocks along the way. These small details should not prevent a program like this from being introduced.

Conclusion

Zuberbuhler (1995, p. 21) states the benefits best when he says, “Adventure education is about putting people in a natural environment where the rules are different. Age, job, money, clothes, cars, status, title, ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, and personal appearance, which often define who we are in our school communities, count for very little in an experiential program. Experiential programs provide opportunities for individual strengths and weaknesses to come to the forefront, allowing individuals and groups to appreciate meaningful differences among people, cutting through the packaging by which most people define and protect themselves.” Keeping Zuberbuhler’s statement in mind, one might realize that we have our country’s greatest resource, youth, in our hands. It is our job as educators, parents, and citizens to develop this great resource to the fullest. Providing adventure opportunities should help prepare adolescents to become responsible members of society, as well as giving them the crucial skills to do their jobs well. Along with the basics, youth need to feel successful in life, become fully aware of their own abilities, and find self-confidence and self-respect. These can all be accomplished through adventure activities. Society should not ignore that young people need to use their bodies as well as their minds and that they crave meaningful challenge and excitement. Adventure activities can succeed with the majority of adolescents, regardless of their physical, mental, or emotional limitations. Students not only gain satisfaction while having fun during these activities, they learn that life is about challenge and that giving their best will help them gain the most satisfaction from living.

It is our responsibility both as educators and members of society to provide adventure as part of the physical education curriculum for young people. We must enter the challenge with open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and courage.

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